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Source: *Arthuriana*, SPRING 2015, Vol. 25, No. 1, Special Issue on Cinematic Re-imaginings of Arthurian Literature (SPRING 2015), pp. 101-112

Published by: Scriptorium Press

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.com/stable/24643431

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Pendragons at the Chopping Block: Elements of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the BBC's *Merlin*

ERIN CHANDLER

The BBC's *Merlin* (2008) borrows elements of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in two of its early episodes, adjusting the thematic content of the poem to appeal to its audience of parents and children by placing the family rather than the court at the center of conflict. (EC)

Merlin (2008), the BBC's Saturday-night serial adaptation of the Arthurian legend, adds to a tradition that has produced centuries of re-imaginings and re-interpretations even as it departs from that tradition's most established precedents. Unlike several recent film adaptations, most notably *King Arthur* (2004), *Merlin* makes no claim to historical accuracy, instead adopting a pure fantasy aesthetic, nor does it take one specific romance or novel as its source. In the commentary for the pilot episode of *Merlin*, 'The Dragon's Call,' producer Julian Murphy acknowledges criticism for historical inaccuracy, explaining that they are 'creating a show that isn't a period show; it takes place in a fantasy world,' with co-producer Johnny Capps adding, 'We were very keen not to be historically accurate.'[1] *Merlin* in fact reverses what most readers and viewers think of as the 'standard' set-up of the Arthurian legend, in which Merlin is old and wise by the time Arthur comes out of obscurity to be made king and marry a noble lady named Guenevere. This series presents a young Merlin acting as manservant to the equally young Prince Arthur, a King Uther relentlessly persecuting sorcerers well into his son's young adulthood, and a Guenevere who, for the first three seasons of the show, spends her days arranging flowers for the king's ward, the Lady Morgana. Other original additions include a giant, computer-generated dragon (voiced by John Hurt) giving cryptic advice in a cave under the castle, and the Lady of the Lake in the form of a werepanther.

This is not to say, however, that *Merlin* ignores the Arthurian tradition entirely—far from it. The show's Excalibur is engraved, as Tennyson's is, with the phrases 'take me up' and 'cast me away';[2] Camelot's court historian and genealogist is named Geoffrey of Monmouth, in honor of the author of the *Historia Regum Britanniae*; and an early episode even shows Merlin cleaning

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his room by magic, as another Merlin does in Disney's cartoon version of *The Sword in the Stone* (1963). These allusions are sly and varied enough to indicate that the writers of *Merlin* are familiar with the legend, and where they depart from what has come before, they do so for a purpose. As in any adaptation, *Merlin* conveys its central messages through what it chooses to include and to leave out. One text for which *Merlin* seems to bear a particular affinity is the fourteenth-century alliterative romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In examining how elements of this poem have been used in the television program, we can see in place of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s trial of Arthur's Camelot through its best knight, a trial of Uther's Camelot through the character of Arthur.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight begins with a New Year's feast interrupted by the arrival of a bold and enormous knight whose skin, hair, clothing, and horse are all bright green. The Green Knight challenges any knight who dares accept his terms to deliver him one blow with an axe on the condition that in a year the knight must find him to receive a return blow. It is Gawain who ultimately beheads—but fails to kill—the Knight, and so at the appointed time, he rides forth to seek the Green Chapel, lodging over the Christmas holiday at the castle of Bertilak de Hautdesert, who engages him in a treacherous exchange-of-winnings game.

By the time he returns to Camelot, Gawain has been tested in more complicated ways than he had anticipated. In the conclusion to his *Reading*, J.A. Burrow provides a neat analysis of the different levels of tests with which Gawain must cope over the course of his adventure:

> The less problematical kind [of test] is that in which some virtue comes into conflict with some deep but fundamentally ignoble passion. Such a conflict—represented in the *Gawain*-poet's outer, beheading test—is rather too simple in itself...The more problematical kind of test situation—represented in the inner, exchange-of-winnings part of *Sir Gawain*—involves conflict between a virtue and some other virtue or virtuous passion.[3]

At the outset of the poem, Gawain must simply keep his word and avoid doing wrong, but as his quest progresses, he must make the more difficult choice between obligations of chivalry and courtesy—for example, to Bertilak and to his lady. Much critical discussion has surrounded the precise nature of Gawain's failure here in such complicated circumstances. The Green Knight assesses him positively in all but one regard:

> As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more,
> So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oþer gay knyȝtez.
> Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewté yow wonted;
> Bot þat watz for no wylyde werke, ne wowyng nauþer,
> Bot for ȝe lufed your lyf—þe lasse I yow blame. (2364–68)

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> [As the pearl is of more value than the white pea, so is Gawain, in good faith, than other fine knights. But here you lacked a little, sir, and you wanted good faith; but that was for no skillful craftsmanship, nor for wooing neither, but because you loved your life—the less I blame you.][4]

Critics have debated at length the precise meaning of the word *lewté*, especially given that Gawain then goes on to accuse himself of 'cowarddyse and couetyse boþe' [cowardice and covetousness both] (2374). David Farley Hills and Burrow concur that *cowarddyse* and *couetyse* are intimately connected with *lewté* in that it is Gawain's cowardice which causes his breach in fidelity when he keeps the girdle, and it is an act of covetousness either to love his life inordinately[5] or to, in a sense, steal the girdle.[6] In any case, this one breach of conduct on Gawain's part reveals how complex the interconnection between all of the virtues embodied in the pentangle on his shield is, and how a small disruption can expose the flaws in the entire chivalric ideal.[7] On its own scale, *Merlin* produces the same sort of revelation when it employs key elements of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in its episodes, but the show's shift in focus away from the central ideas of the poem allows the young Arthur to attempt to define himself against the failures of his father, a key aspect of his development throughout the series into the prophesied Once and Future King.

In 'Excalibur,' the ninth episode of *Merlin*'s first season, written by Julian Jones, the court celebration of Arthur's birthday and official designation as crown prince is interrupted rather abruptly by a knight on horseback crashing through a stained-glass window and approaching the Pendragons while the guests watch in utter silence. The knight is not 'oueral enker grene' [overall very green] (150), but rather his armor, cloak, shield, and horse are all a foreboding black. The Black Knight immediately issues a general challenge of single combat to the death, and Arthur is only prevented by one of the younger knights, Sir Owain, from risking his own life. The intruder in the hall is not an uncommon figure in Arthurian romance; in addition to analogues of *Sir Gawain* such as *The Turke and Sir Gawain* and *The Greene Knight*, similar episodes occur in Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*—when the heavily-armed Meleagant interrupts an Ascension Day feast to inform Arthur that he is holding many of the king's knights prisoner and to issue a challenge to single combat for the custody of the queen—and *Le Conte du Graal*, when a Red Knight demands homage from Arthur and snatches the wine cup out of his hands.[8] The *Merlin* episode is undoubtedly adapting and contributing its own take on this popular motif, and the intervention of the lower-ranking knight on Arthur's behalf—Gawain in the poem and Owain in the television series—alludes more firmly to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* than to any other source.

Furthermore, although the Black Knight does not pick up his own severed head and ride off with it, it becomes clear that, like the Green Knight, he

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cannot be killed by mortal means. Over the course of the episode, two knights deliver would-be killing blows in combat against him, and yet he is unfazed. A final similarity between the Black Knight and the Green Knight is in the origin of their supernatural manifestations. The Black Knight, like the Green Knight, has been sent to court through the machinations of a sorceress with a personal grudge—not Morgan le Fay, whose equivalent in the series is still on good terms with the rest of the family at this point, but Nimueh, a former member of Uther's court. Nimueh can be interpreted to be rather more extreme than *Sir Gawain*'s Morgan, though, in both her goals and her means. In *Sir Gawain,* Morgan le Fay turns Sir Bertilak green

> for to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyhe
> With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked
> With his hede in his honde bifore þe hyȝe table. (2460–62)
>
> [for to have grieved Gaynour and caused her to die from terror of that same man who spoke in a supernatural way with his head in his hand before the high table.]

Nimueh creates the Black Knight by resurrecting Uther's brother-in-law, Tristan du Bois, who died in combat against the king after blaming him for his sister Ygraine's death in childbirth. He is enchanted to fight until his revenge on Uther is finally accomplished. Although there is no beheading game or exchange of blows involved, it is safe to say that the Black Knight has been sent 'for to haf greued' Uther and to cause his death.

A form of beheading game, or at least an allusion to the motif, *does* occur in the second-season episode 'The Sins of the Father' written by Howard Overman. As in *Sir Gawain* and the 'Excalibur' episode, a sorceress is at work—Morgause, this time—but here she steps out from behind the scenes, striding into the hall of Camelot and interrupting a knighting ceremony in order to challenge Arthur yet again to single combat to the death. After defeating him, Morgause tells Arthur that she will spare his life if he makes her a promise: 'Come to me three days hence and accept the challenge I set you' (II.08). She will not reveal the nature of the challenge or how to find her—like Gawain, Arthur is expected to ride 'mony wylsum way' [many uncertain ways] (689) in order to keep his word, and his response to this situation would probably accurately reflect Gawain's thoughts upon receiving his instructions on how to locate the Green Chapel: 'If I don't show up, it might be because I don't know where I'm going' (II.08). The journey is easy neither for Gawain—who fights dragons and giants—nor for Arthur—who is ambushed by hostile soldiers—but these are insignificant distractions compared to what awaits them at the end of their respective journeys. At last, Prince Arthur crosses over a lake, under a waterfall, and into Morgause's fortress. This journey across a body of water and into the enchantress' realm

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mirrors the Otherworld journeys of romance, such as Lancelot's crossing of the sword bridge in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* and its analogues, as well as Arthur's own journey to Avalon in so many Arthurian texts.[9] Arthur finds his destination to be a ruined, overgrown castle as lonesome and empty as Gawain's 'chapel of meschaunce' [chapel of mischance] (2195) at first appears to be. The only sign of habitation he initially sees is an axe resting on a chopping block. Soon, though, Morgause appears and reveals to Arthur his challenge: he is to place his head on the block. Despite Merlin's protests, Arthur does so; Morgause raises the axe, the music crescendos, Arthur braces himself for the blow...and then Morgause sets the axe down, leaving the prince unharmed. The whole ordeal has been a test, and by keeping his appointment and submitting to the beheading challenge, Arthur has passed it; as Morgause tells him, 'You've shown that you are truly a man of your word, Arthur Pendragon' (II.08). This is not the true extent of the test, however. Just as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the beheading game-style challenge in *Merlin* is not as simple as it first appears to be.

The above outlines of 'Excalibur' and 'The Sins of the Father' provide a comparison to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and demonstrate the connections which establish the medieval poem as a source of inspiration for *Merlin*. In addition to these superficial resemblances, though, *Merlin* borrows a certain amount of structure from *Sir Gawain* in order to examine its own themes. Although obviously not replicating the poem's complexity, each of these two episodes uses Burrow's 'less problematic' tests—the combat with the immortal knight and the threat of beheading—to conceal the more subtle and important ones. In *Sir Gawain*, Sir Bertilak and Morgan le Fay expand Gawain's initial trial, and in each case the hero is unaware of the importance of the tests which will determine the outcome of his journey. When he sets out to find the Green Knight, Gawain knows that his courage and his adherence to his word will be tested, but he is not aware until after the fact that Bertilak's games of hunting and temptation will contribute to the outcome of the Beheading Game. He does not know

> that the host and his challenger are the same, that in betraying one he is betraying the other and that in failing either he is failing to live up to his famous courtly perfection. Most important, he is ignorant of the churlish fault within him that is symbolized by the concealed lace. His knightly nature, so he thinks, is still intact.[10]

These questions of courtly and moral conduct rest at the heart of the poem, highlighting a particular system of values in which *trawþe* is the defining virtue of a knight, embodied in the pentangle Gawain bears on his shield, and a lack of *lewté* is the principal fault which, the Green Knight explains, keeps him from perfection (623–26, 2366). Closer examination of the two episodes of *Merlin* that draw so heavily on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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reveals that there, too, the less overt tests shed light on the system of values around which the series' adaptation of the Arthurian legend is based.

Arthur's personal qualities that are most overtly tested in 'Excalibur' and 'The Sins of the Father' are stated outright in the first scenes of each episode, an opportunity afforded by the fact that both begin with ceremonies—a knighting and a coronation—in which the characters must pledge themselves to the ideals of Camelot's society. The new knights in 'The Sins of the Father' are informed, 'From this day forth, you are sworn to live by the Knights' Code. You have pledged to conduct yourselves with nobility, honor, and respect. Your word is your sacred bond' (II.08). All of these virtues are demonstrated by Arthur in the episode. The vows are more specific to kingship in 'Excalibur,' where Uther has Arthur pledge to 'govern the people of this kingdom and its dominions according to the statutes, customs, and laws laid down by [his] forebears,' 'to exercise mercy and justice in all [his] deeds and judgments,' and to 'swear allegiance to Camelot, now and for as long as [he] shall live' (I.09). Arthur responds that he will 'pledge life and limb to [Uther's] service and to the protection of the kingdom and its peoples' (I.09). As the episode demonstrates, though, some aspects of this vow can come into conflict with the others, and Arthur must use his moral compass to navigate the discrepancies. This is just the type of problematic choice between virtues which underlies *Sir Gawain.* The more difficult and less overt challenges issued by the Black Knight and Morgause, respectively, force Arthur to confront these issues and determine how he will eventually rule.

The intent to put Arthur's fitness as future king to the test is more explicit in 'The Sins of the Father'; at the beginning of the episode, Morgause declares that 'the battle for [Arthur's] soul is about to begin' (II.08), whereas Nimueh in 'Excalibur' has the primary goal of killing Uther. Even Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain*, however, is able to hold the simultaneous aims of scaring Guinevere to death and testing the rumored pride of the Round Table. In the same way, Nimueh's (perhaps overly complicated) assassination scheme also tests Arthur's courage and sense of justice when he insists on fighting the Black Knight, even though he is aware of the danger. In this episode and in 'The Sins of the Father,' Arthur proves his courage in the face of almost certain death, and he proves that he will keep his word even when given multiple opportunities to turn back. In 'Excalibur,' two knights initially take up the Black Knight's challenge rather than allowing Arthur to fight him, and Merlin, Uther, and Morgana each discourage Arthur from going through with the combat. In 'The Sins of the Father,' Uther confines his son to his chambers in order to keep him from fulfilling his promise to Morgause, but Arthur recruits Merlin to help him escape. These qualities are the same as those which Gawain knows are being tested as he sets off for the Green Chapel in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Arthur, like Gawain, passes thus far

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with flying colors. Added to Arthur's list of admirable qualities is a sense of justice and humility particularly valuable in a prince; nearly as often as he repeats in these episodes that he will not be a coward and that he will not break his promises, Arthur insists that he must adhere to the same code of honor which his men follow: 'There cannot be one rule for me and one for all the rest' (1.09). He will not back out of the Black Knight's challenge and let each of his knights in turn die in his place, and once Morgause's initial challenge to single combat has been formally accepted, he will fight her just as any other knight would be expected to do. In adhering to the Knights' Code, however, Arthur comes directly into conflict with the wishes of his king and father, who would have him take advantage of his status as prince to keep himself out of danger.

Both 'Excalibur' and 'The Sins of the Father' are episodes which revolve around Arthur and Uther's relationship as father and son and as once and future king, respectively. The show's first press release in 2008 pegged it as being 'set to enchant family audiences,'[11] and so it is fitting that the test which cannot be perceived by the characters as it is happening, the hidden test behind the more obvious and simple one, is of this filial relationship. In both episodes, father and son come into conflict over how best to protect and lead the kingdom—by example, as Arthur wishes, or by staying alive through any means necessary, as Uther wishes for his son. It is a recurring element of the series that Arthur must stand up for what he believes is right, even if it is in opposition to the father whose approval he desires. While Uther's position may be more practical, in that a living heir is central to maintaining peace and stability in the kingdom, Arthur's more democratic notion of what should be important to a ruler appeals to the 'new generation' that is the show's target audience in its emphasis on proving one's individual merit. *Merlin* has been marketed as a 'rites of passage story which sees Merlin and Arthur on the cusp of adulthood,'[12] and as such, it is key that Arthur, like many adolescents, learns to distance himself from blind obedience to his father and his father's beliefs.

In fact, in the process of becoming the king he is destined to be, Arthur must come to define himself not just apart from, but in *opposition* to Uther. In 'Excalibur' and 'The Sins of the Father,' his successful completion of the overt trials set for him proves Arthur's character, making him seem all the more noble in comparison with his father. For the sorceresses who orchestrate the tests, this is vital. If Nimueh's primary goal of the death of Uther in 'Excalibur' were accomplished, Arthur would become king, and she needs to know whether another elaborate assassination plot would be in order. Morgause is plainly testing Arthur to see what kind of king he will be and whether he is capable of defying his father. Both sorceresses, who have suffered at Uther's hands, are eager to see whether the son will be a better man than the father, and it would seem that, again, Arthur passes his tests.

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His reward for doing so is a restoration of harmony similar to that at the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* when Gawain returns to Arthur's court. Just as Gawain is accepted back into a court joyful at his safe return, Prince Arthur in each case is reconciled with Uther in spite of his defiance of his father's commands. Normally reluctant to show affection for his son, Uther concludes each episode with the same sentiment: 'You mean more to me than anything I know—more than this entire kingdom and certainly more than my own life' (I.09). Indeed, he is willing to sacrifice himself to save Arthur by fighting the Black Knight in his place in 'Excalibur,' and although Arthur's anger in 'The Sins of The Father' actually erupts into violence between the two, all is quickly forgiven. This reassertion of familial love and acceptance in spite of ongoing conflict forms the resolution of both episodes and affirms the centrality of the parent-child relationship in this series. It is not the court which is at the heart of *Merlin*—it is the family.

While the *trawþe* of the court is subjected to scrutiny in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the bond between Arthur and Uther undergoes a similar treatment in *Merlin,* and in both cases, latent flaws are exposed. At the conclusion of each of these episodes, just as at the conclusion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* there is a sense that something is not quite right. In the poem, Sir Gawain falls short of absolute perfection, and the appropriateness of the court's concluding merriment in light of this has been debated at length. Henk Aertsen, for example, asserts that the laughter is merely to 'relieve the tension,'[13] while J.J. Anderson argues that it 'reflects only a shallow view of life, in which such things as pain and guilt are ignored.'[14] Does *Merlin*'s Prince Arthur similarly fail, and are these potential failings left unresolved? In 'Excalibur,' Arthur does not actually fulfill his pledge to fight the Black Knight, but this is because Uther has him drugged and locked in his room so that he (i.e. Uther) may do so instead. Arthur also does not completely break with his father as Morgause would wish him to in 'The Sins of the Father,' but to follow through with her plans would have meant patricide, an act which would take Arthur's struggle for independence from his father several steps too far, especially for a young audience. In fact, Arthur behaves throughout almost exactly as we might wish him to. If someone falters in *Merlin*'s *Sir Gawain*-style testing, it is not Arthur at all—it is Uther.

Something darker links the familial conflict in these two episodes in particular: both deal directly with what is referred to throughout the series as 'the secret of Arthur's birth.' Unable to have a child with his wife, Queen Ygraine, and desperate for an heir, Uther turned to Nimueh to help conceive Arthur through magic, by all accounts knowing that the price, in order to restore the balance of the universe, would be someone's death. When it was his own wife who paid with her life for Uther's bargain, he deflected the blame onto all practitioners of magic and began his campaign to have them

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all hunted down and killed. It is for this reason that Nimueh conjures the Black Knight through necromancy, and why said knight blamed Uther for Ygraine's death while he was living. The most profound test of Arthur and Uther's relationship, then, takes place as Uther's past, literally in this case, comes back to haunt him. Through this apparent trial of Arthur, Uther himself is tested, and in a much more direct fashion than that by which Camelot's court is tested in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* with Gawain standing as its representative. Uther must determine how much he is willing to sacrifice in order to keep his guilt a secret. Although repeatedly urged by Gaius, the court physician and Merlin's mentor, to tell Arthur whom the Black Knight is really after and why, Uther refuses, even though it seems to be the only way to convince Arthur not to participate in a fight that would mean his death. In the end, even Uther's heroic act of self-sacrifice in facing the Black Knight is also an act of cowardice, a way to avoid having to tell Arthur the truth. Gawain's failure is due to fear for his life, but Uther fears the loss of something less concrete, and at the end of the episode, the issue is left unresolved.

It is, in fact, this failure on Uther's part which enables Morgause to manipulate both him and Arthur in 'The Sins of the Father.' Twelve episodes later, Arthur still does not know the truth about his conception and birth, and Uther states that he fears 'more than anything' (II.08) that Morgause knows and will tell him. Indeed, a large part of the reason Arthur keeps his appointment with Morgause is her artfully-dropped comment that she knew his mother, and his reward for proving himself to be a man of honor is a vision of Ygraine, who finally reveals the nature of Arthur's origins to him for the first time. Arthur is so upset when he returns to Camelot that he challenges his father to a duel and nearly kills him. While Uther's death is clearly the outcome Morgause would prefer, it is prevented when Uther and Merlin together convince Arthur that she was lying, that the vision of Ygraine was a false one, and that Uther had nothing to do with her death. Arthur therefore ends the episode as ignorant of the truth as he began. Having just seen Arthur prove his honor to Morgause, the viewer may well agree with the prince that Uther might 'speak of honor and nobility,' but he is 'nothing but a hypocrite and a liar' (II.08). The king's continued inability to confront the past means that Arthur will continue to be unable to make an informed decision about his own stance regarding magic, and it will continue to leave both Pendragons vulnerable to attack.

While Arthur, like Gawain, undergoes a series of tests in each episode, Uther's 'cowarddyse' (2374) is the ominous failure which haunts the endings of the two episodes of *Merlin* influenced by *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* In fact, the third season of the series focuses on Morgana playing what is essentially the legendary Mordred role, turning against her father, Uther, and

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everyone dear to him for his past actions and his refusal to acknowledge his errors. Morgana discovers in the third season that Uther had an adulterous relationship with her mother, and that she is therefore his illegitimate daughter. The incident renders Morgana's conception in *Merlin* as something resembling Arthur's in most versions of the legend, in which Uther pursues Ygraine despite her marriage to Gorlois. It also means that Morgana, like Malory's Mordred and Arthur, is born as the result of sexual misconduct. Perhaps more importantly, her betrayal of Uther and Arthur is set up in *Merlin* as more devastating than Mordred's is likely to be, because she is part of the Pendragon family, whereas Mordred is not. Within *Merlin*'s universe, Mordred's hatred of the Pendragon dynasty is also established early on as based on Uther's persecution of those born with magic: a young Mordred appears in the first-season episode that immediately precedes 'Excalibur.' The episode, entitled 'The Beginning of the End,' revolves around Uther hunting down the young druid in order to have him executed. It seems that, in this series, Arthur's eventual downfall may have little to do with his own faults at all. In the body of Arthurian literature, Arthur seldom bears sole or even primary blame for his downfall; where works like Malory's, which makes Mordred the product of incest, render Arthur somewhat culpable, factions in the court and the machinations of fortune also share in the blame. Some critics, like Maureen Fries, argue that in the chronicle tradition, Arthur overreaches in his European conquest, stating that 'in turning from a finely delineated peace to an absolute war, from defense of his own lands to conquest of others, Arthur takes the step that will prove decisive in his own tragic fall,'[15] but Mordred's immoderate actions rather than Arthur's are what directly occasion that fall. Works like Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* avoid placing any of the fault for the downfall of his kingdom on Arthur himself, instead shifting it onto characters like Guinevere and Lancelot. Before granting his forgiveness, Tennyson's innocent Arthur informs Guinevere that

> The children born of thee are sword and fire,
> Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws,
> The craft of kindred and the Godless hosts
> Of heathen swarming o'er the Northern Sea. (421–425)[16]

These works have deliberately set up a generally blameless king, and *Merlin* may be doing something similar. In this case, the seeds of Arthur's downfall are sown when he himself is in his infancy. Though the series' fifth and final season reveals that Arthur's bane will ultimately be himself, most of Arthur's struggles originate in the policies set and the decisions made by Uther. When Arthur fails, it is in adhering too much to his father's order. This version of Arthur presents for a modern and young audience a character who is constantly striving for perfection, not falling from it as Sir Gawain does, or indeed as many versions of Arthur do.[17] He might start the series as an 'arrogant

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prat' (I.1), but his is a story of coming-of-age and improvement which may, after all, result in a perfect king. What the testing of Arthur and Uther in these episodes highlights is indeed the core of the show's mythology: Arthur as a young man is doing the right thing in continually striving to break free from the faults and mistakes of his father, and the tragedy of his destiny is that he will never quite be able to.

Merlin is certainly not meant to be taken too seriously, but it should not be dismissed as an inconsequential Arthurian adaptation either. Its fantasy setting and atmosphere enable the production team to privilege themes and ideas over attempts at historical accuracy or strict literary fidelity. In alluding to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the writers and producers of *Merlin* were able to use the poem's structure to place emphasis on the central concepts of family and familial conflict in the series. This might not account for the werepanther or King Uther's brief marriage to a troll, but it does show that when the series interprets the more traditional aspects of the Arthurian legend, it does so not just to provide a touchstone for the audience, but to highlight its own set of values, just as Arthurian adapters have been doing since at least the twelfth century.

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NOTES

1 Johnny Capps and Julian Murphy, 'Audio Commentaries: The Dragon's Call,' *Merlin*, DVD (2008; Burbank, CA: Shine Limited, 2010).
2 'Excalibur,' *Merlin*, DVD, directed by Jeremy Webb (2008; Burbank, CA: Shine Limited, 2010). Subsequent citations from the series will be noted by season and episode number (e.g. II.08).
3 J.A. Burrow, *A Reading of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), pp. 161–2.
4 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007). All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. All translations are my own.
5 David Farley Hills, 'Gawain's Fault in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,' *Review of English Studies* XIV (1963): 124–131.
6 Burrow, *A Reading of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, p. 136.
7 See, for example, W.R.J. Barron, *Trawthe and Treason: The Sin of Gawain Reconsidered* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 48, and Derek Pearsall, 'Courtesy and Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: the Order of Shame and the Invention of Embarrassment,' in *A Companion to the Gawain-*

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Poet, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 351–362.

8 For further examples, see Elizabeth Brewer, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Sources and Analogues* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992).

9 See Lucy Allen Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* (New York: B. Franklin, 1960).

10 Larry D. Benson, *Art and Tradition in* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1965), p. 226.

11 'Merlin's secrets revealed,' BBC Press Office, last modified July 23, 2008. http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2008/07_july/23/merlin.shtml.

12 'Merlin's secrets revealed.'

13 Henk Aertsen, 'Game and Eaernest in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*' in *Companion to Middle English Romance,* ed. Henk Aertsen and Alisdair A. MacDonald (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1990), p. 99 [83–100].

14 J.J. Anderson, 'The Three Judgments and the Ethos of Chivalry in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,"' *The Chaucer Review* 24.4 (Spring 1990), p. 343 [337–355].

15 Maureen Fries, 'Boethian Themes and Tragic Structure in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae,*' in *The Arthurian Tradition: Essays in Convergence,* ed. Mary Flowers Braswell and John Bugge (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988), p. 38 [29–42].

16 Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'Guinevere,' in *A Variorum Edition of Tennyson's* Idylls of the King, ed. John Pfordresher (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

17 An Arthur striving for perfection is a feature found most often in works which deal exclusively with Arthur's youth, such as *The Sword in the Stone* and *The Faerie Queene.*

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